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Lifting lockdown – a tragedy of the commons

The problem with the way the Italian government manages the transition from lockdown to a lower degree of emergency is that it does not manage it.

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Crowded streets during the first day of Yellow Zone in Lombardy, December 13, 2020. | Alessandro Bremec/PA.

Italy is currently facing one of the most delicate phases of the Covid pandemic: the gradual release of the lockdown following the second wave of the virus. And this is happening just before Christmas, the period par excellence of shopping and convivial encounters. The fundamental and most dangerous shift is that which determines the transition of a region from a red zone (the highest level of emergency) to an orange zone (the intermediate level). The difference between the two colours is that, although in both zones bars and restaurants are only accessible for take-away consumption, in the orange zone shops reopen and people can move within the municipal boundaries.

The results so far have been dangerous. In both large and small cities, people have been pouring into the streets from day one, creating queues and crowds outside shops, in front of bars and bringing back glimmers of social life. Obviously, this is not only an Italian phenomenon, but it is something that is repeated in many other countries. And the most recent examples that come to mind are the crowds at the ski resorts in Switzerland or the people celebrating the loosening of the lockdown in London by spilling out into the streets, almost as if it were a national holiday.

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In the Italian public debate, there is a vibrant discussion on the subject. According to some, people are behaving irresponsibly and endangering everyone. According to others, we should instead stop blaming people who have been at home responsibly for almost a month and now want to do nothing but buy presents for their loved ones or take a walk through the Christmas lights. But two things are certain. The first is that if the situation continues in this way, it is likely that the contagion curve will rise again, and that new restrictive

measures will have to be put in place at the beginning of the new year – a severe blow to the Italian economic system, as for many others. The second is that it is not clear by what moral paradigm one can claim that the people who have now returned to the streets are endangering the community (assuming that they follow all the health norms): after all, if the restrictions have been lowered it is because the contagion curve has dropped, so what is wrong with going shopping or taking a metro?

A third way if we're clever

I want to argue in this short article that the lifting of lockdown is a typical case of the tragedy of the commons, and as such should be regulated by public authority, instead of being left to the ethics and responsibility of single individuals. I would therefore argue that we should think about an intermediate phase between the lockdown and the opening of shops (which in the Italian case is the transition from the red zone to the orange zone): diversified access to commercial activities, on an hourly basis, for different population groups.

This can be achieved either by creating different opening hours for different commercial activities and offices, or by opening them all at the same time but introducing free entrance hours based on age groups of clients. Both solutions would imply an extension of business and office hours, contrary to what has happened in most countries, where an attempt has been made to shorten the days and in some cases, such as in Italy, a curfew has even been introduced at a certain time of the day (in Italy, at 10 pm).

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A tragedy of the commons is a collective action problem that arises whenever

there is a rival and non-exclusive resource to be divided between two or more people. When it comes to the tragedy of common goods, the starting model is usually that of the American ecologist Garrett Hardin, to whom we also owe the term. A series of shepherds find themselves having to manage a common field, each shepherd has an interest in moving as many animals as possible from the private to the common field, because in this way he shares with the others the negative externalities of his animals (mainly the consumption of grass), while keeping all the benefits for himself (milk, meat, wool, etc.). However, if all shepherds stubbornly pursue their own personal interest, the worst-case scenario occurs for all: the over-exploitation of the common field ruins it and makes it unusable.

The collective action problem underlying the lockdown lifting has an identical structure. There is a common good, which are the streets, the possibility of shopping, life in the city. And this common good has become a rival one in the aftermath of the pandemic: if we want to avoid contagion, we cannot all go out at the same time. Everyone pursues her/his individual interest by satisfying her/his own needs (which in most cases, at this moment would seem to be to go out). If everyone pursues her/his individual interest, among other things by doing actions that are apparently not wrong, indeed we could say praiseworthy, like living sociality, buying gifts, etc., we risk eroding the common resource, which in this case is the capacity of the health system to treat a certain number of sick people (another way of looking at it is that the common resource at risk of exhaustion are the beds in intensive care). If this happens, we all end up in the worst-case scenario for all, a new lockdown.

Yo-yo governance

The problem with the way the Italian government, like many other governments, manages the transition from lockdown to the immediately lower degree of emergency, is that it does not manage it. It leaves it to the collective coordination of people. And it intervenes only shortly before the tragedy of the commons takes place in its worst-case scenario, a pandemic out of control.

It is certainly true that in certain contexts it is possible to reach a bottom-up collective agreement on the use of common goods without any form of direct

coercion, but it takes time, trust and familiarity among group members. And this is certainly not the case with the pandemic.

A typical example of what I would call "yo-yo management" of the pandemic is the one that took place in Italy between the first and second wave of Covid-19, i.e. between the summer and autumn of this year. As soon as we saw the fruits of the first, hard and long lockdown, everything went back to normal. Gradually the means of transport, schools, offices, bars and restaurants filled up again. The government let the yo-yo go down, until the numbers of contagions returned at so high a pitch that the region where I live, for example, Tuscany, went from yellow to orange and to orange from red in less than a week. The risk is that this will happen again and that with the arrival of the new year we will find ourselves locked up at home again. The problem is that this yo-yo can dip downwards two, maximum three times, before it breaks and the game is over.

Governing the pandemic means controlling it, not chasing it. And controlling it means making sure that everyone has access to a share of the common resource, compatibly with an equal quota granted to all the others – moments of free time and leisure, in shops, bars, squares, wherever you want. In short, a middle way between the subways full of people, and Sundays spent at home on the sofa.

Two ways to do this

How to achieve this? In the same way that you govern Hardin's common field. Since it is not possible to privatize public space (and as far as I am concerned not even desirable), we need to introduce limits on access to public space. Two ways immediately come to mind, but I am not an expert on pandemics, so any further suggestions are more than welcome. One method is to extend the hours of leisure and work activities until late in the evening, dividing and diversifying the opening hours. For example, given the continuous opening of basic necessities shops, it could be established that clothes shops open in a certain time slot, along with tech and candy shops. Sports shops open at a different time slot, along with handbags shops and bookshops. And so on. At the same time, the exit hours from the offices could be matched with the opening hours of shops of more basic things and with the closing hours of retail shops and

bars. And the same could be done for schools. But obviously the best thing would be, at least in a first phase, to keep closed as many offices and schools as possible and to work from home.

This first solution would dilute the flow of people who go out for normal pre-Christmas activities (but also afterwards, the flow of those who go out to have fun, meet or walk around the shops), also trying to misalign it with the movements of workers and students. And it would have the advantage of not introducing movement restrictions, i.e. it would use simple disincentives.

The second solution, on the other hand, is more coercive and requires a greater effort of control, but it would have the advantage of avoiding multiple individual exits and would certainly prevent the creation of dangerous gatherings: the introduction of free entry time slots in shops on an age basis. This method would give results even if simply applied at the weekend. And it would not require people to stay at home until their age range arrives, but would only prevent them from entering the shops. For example, if it is 11 am and you are 46 years old and it has been established that your free movement range (40-60 years old) is from 4 pm to 6 pm, this means that you can leave the house and go wherever you want, but you cannot enter shops, bars and restaurants. Smaller shops could check your documents at the entrance or at the time of payment, while larger shops could introduce scanners for identity documents or health cards, such as those for buying cigarettes at vending machines, to be used when measuring your body temperature.

Both solutions would be an intermediate route between lockdown and its removal. They would imply an extension of the business hours of shops to a level higher than that which existed before the pandemic. Cities would return to life and everyone would have access to a share of a fundamental resource that has suddenly become scarce, namely public space. By spreading their activity over a longer daily period of time, commercial activities would continue to make a profit, and even if they made less profit than in an open access situation, the fact that the risk of a new lockdown has decreased should be a benefit to all.

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Obviously, there would be a need for more theoretical and practical elaboration, also depending on the different national and regional contexts. What I wanted to say is that there is a second way with respect to yoyo management (closing-opening-closing), and it is an opening even higher than normal, in terms of hourly duration, but in some way rationed with respect to specific groups of the population.

Let's avoid the absurd

Let's think again about Hardin's field and imagine what yoyo management would mean. The shepherds would agree to create a public authority, which would let the shepherds bring as many animals as they wish into the common field, and as soon as the situation became unsustainable for the land, it would close the field and send all the shepherds home. It would then reopen as soon as the grass starts to grow back, and after a while the same problem would arise as before. I think that almost everyone would agree that this solution is absurd, and we would say that (if privatization is impossible, or not desirable) it is necessary to establish what is the maximum number of animals the field can host and divide it by the number of shepherds. Both the two proposals that I have mentioned are ways to divide into individual quotas the pressure that public space can sustain at the time of Covid.

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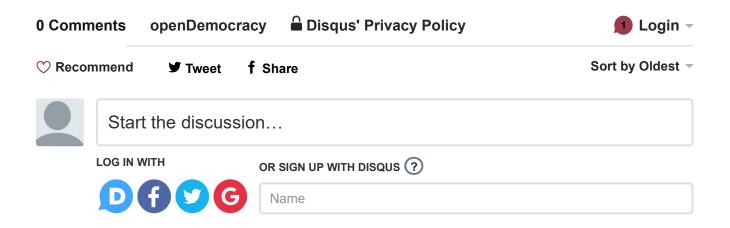Join the conversation: get our weekly email

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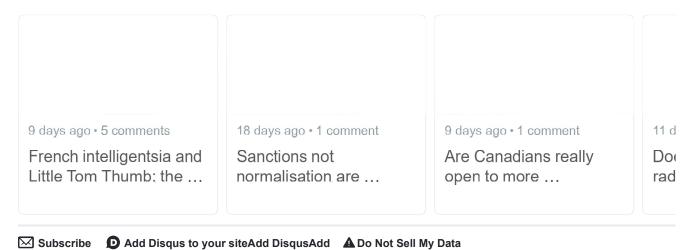First name (optional)

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